DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 034 798 TE 500 481

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TITLE	The English Novel in One Semester.
INSTITUTION	College English Association, Inc.
PUB DATE	Apr 65
NOTE	2p.
JOURNAL CIT	The CEA Critic; v27 n7 p4-5 Apr 1965
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.20
DESCRIPTORS	College Curriculum, Course Descriptions, Course Objectives, Course Organization, Elective Reading, English Curriculum, English Education, *English Instruction, *English Literature, *Novels, Reading Assignments, Reading Materials, *Reading Material Selection, Semester Division, *Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

The awesome task of teaching the English novel in one semester at a small college is illustrated and made more feasible in this concise article. A selected group of novels is commented upon specifically, comprising a total volume of more than 4,100 pages of assigned reading. Using the incentive of higher grades, the author provides two other lists of novels to encourage additional reading. Emphasis is placed on the concept of non-standardized lists which nonetheless stress the reading and background reading considered to be most desirable. (RL)

ED034798

From: The CEA Critic, Vol. 27, No. 7, April 1965.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The English Novel In One Semester

Of all the tremendous jobs that the English teacher in a small college is asked to do, covering the English novel in one semester is assuredly one of the most difficult. The problem is almost as imposing as teaching freshmen to write. When one considers the awesome list that begins with Defoe and ends only at the whim of the teacher, he may find the problem heart-rending. There are at least twenty major novelists that an undergraduate in English should meet at first hand. This is a minimum. He ought to know more before he launches into teaching or graduate study.

This is a problem peculiar to the small college or university with limited staff. A second semester for the English novel means that the Romantic poets or Milton cannot be offered that semester. We do not have the facilities for a survey of two or frequently three semesters.

This is more than a problem of selection. The situation works a serious hardship on our English majors whom we send forth to compete with their more fully prepared peers from larger schools. More and more students of real ability in English are planning to do graduate work. We have a clear responsibility to give them the best background possible. That means including the most material possible in the limited time at our disposal.

The general goals are obvious. The student should read representative novels by a large number of important novelists. It is also desirable that he read novels of distinct types, such as the Gothic novel and the strictly didactic novel. Second, he should develop some insights into the aesthetic structure of the novel. Third, he should have a general knowledge of the history of the novel in England.

Before we can outline a specific program, we should consider certain facts.

• First, the student has done some reading before entering the course. It is a safe assumption that most students who have gotten as far as a course in the novel have read more extensively than the average student. *Pride and Prejudice, Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights,* something of Dickens, something of Hardy.

• The second fact to consider is that there is no necessary relation between the length of a novel and its value for class analysis. *Pamela* and *Tom Jones* are time-consuming books, and for that reason alone I hesitate to make them a part of the regular class assignments.

• The third fact is that the teacher can use his conference hours profitably.

My plan is to arrange the course so that the students read what they "should" cover, and allocate class time to those novels that have proved most successful in the classroom. My plan is flexible enough so that each teacher can follow his own tastes.

My first step is to draw up a list of the novels that the students should read. My list extends from Defoe to Virginia Woolf. Then I make a list of additional novelists that it would be desirable for them to read. This list includes Ann Radcliffe (or Mary Shelley), Fanny Burney, Trollope (some would include him in the first list), George Moore, Gissing, Galsworthy, Bennett, Butler, and more recently Huxley, Waugh, Cary, and Durrell.

My next step is to decide which novels to use for my class texts. This list varies a bit from semester to semester as experience and the mood dictate. This semester the course list includes *Robinson Crusoe, Frankenstein, Great Expectations, The Mill on the Floss, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, The Return of the Native, The American, Brave New World, Lord Jim, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, To the Lighthouse,* and *A Passage to India.*

This list averages out to something less than a novel a week. The reader will immediately notice and perhaps criticize the omission of *Tom Jones, Pride and Prejudice,* and *Vanity Fair.* But remember that one purpose is to conserve class time. Joyce and Conrad need more work by the teacher than does Fielding. The total number of pages in the editions we use is something over 4100, which comes to less than three hundred pages a week. This

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list makes up the basic texts for the course —with one exception, which I shall mention later. Satisfactory work in these readings will merit a "C" in the course.

But I count on the fact that most English students want a better grade than "C".

Beyond this required material there are two additional lists, a "B" list and an "A" list. These lists are composed of titles that a student must read if he is to make better than a "C." He must read six books from the "B" list to get a "B," and he must read six additional books to get an "A." Some books that are short count as only half a book.

The "B" list includes those novels before the twentieth century that students should read: *Pamela* or part of *Clarissa, Tom Jones, Tristram Shandy, Humphry Clinker, Pride and Prejudice, The Heart of Midlothian, Vanity Fair, Pickwick Papers, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre.* The student chooses from among these his six for individual reports. If he has read any of them recently, he may substitute another novel subject to my approval. If he does not want to re-read a novel that he has already read, he must demonstrate to me that he still remembers it reasonably well. Usually a couple of questions are enough to tell whether the book is still clear in his mind. If it is not, he must re-read it. By the time they have finished this group, students have a fairly representative list of pre-twentieth century English novels when we add the other books assigned as basic texts.

The "A" requirement includes those books on the "B" list not yet read and continues into the twentieth century. If by some chance the student has read none of the basic novels in the "B" list when he enters the class, he must read all of them before starting on the twentieth century. As yet no such student has appeared in my English novel class. From this "A" list the student can choose such writers as the teacher may consider significant. The list can be made as extensive as necessary for the student who has already read widely.

To insure a consistent historical background, we cover ten pages a day in Stevenson's *The English Novel,* which enables us to dispense with note taking to a large extent.

This system fosters the development of a broad background in the English novel within the limited time at our disposal. It takes advantage of the individual student's background instead of making an assumption of standardized reading. And it stresses the background and reading that it is most desirable for the student to have.

The individual reports are often enlightening. *Tom Jones* is too long, *Humphry Clinker* is hilarious, and *Pride and Prejudice* is trivial. The discussion starts and the time is well spent.

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